THE MARKETING OF CANADIAN ESKIMO ART.

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The marketing of Canadian Eskimo Art.

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by

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Dept. of Anthropology
University of California
Berkeley, Calif., U.S.A.

A paper given at the Annual Meetings of the
Northeastern Anthropological Association,

Carlton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

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THE MARKETING OF CANADIAN ESKIMO ART[1]

The production of sculpture, prints and handicrafts is an important source of livelihood for the majority of the Eskimos of the Eastern and Central Canadian Arctic. In some settlements at certain times such productions are the major source of money income for many individuals, and for these people this income provides for the necessities of food and clothing that until recently used to be procured from hunting, fishing and other traditional activities. This paper discusses the various methods by which these new products are marketed, the advantages and disadvantages, (financial and social) of each method, and the possibilities of new marketing methods. This latter focus concerns whether certain of the more renowned Eskimo artists should market their works directly through retainer arrangements with art dealers.

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[1]An earlier version of this paper was prepared for the Eskimo Arts Council at the suggestion of Mrs. Alma Houston (Fall 1969). The research upon which this paper is largely based was carried out in the Eastern Canadian Arctic during 1967-68, supported by Grant N.S.F.-G.S.-1762 from the National Science Foundation, Washington, D.C. Other relevant observations were made during fieldwork in the same area in 1959 and 1960 for the Federal Government of Canada, and during 1963-64, supported by the Cooperative Cross-Cultural Study of Ethnocentrism through Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. Many thanks are also due to Eskimos of the Canadian Arctic; members of the Hudson's Bay Company; personnel of the Federal Governemnt of Canada, of Canadian Arctic Producers, Ottawa, of the Federation of Cooperatives of Nouveau Quebec, of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild; and many others who have discussed these matters with me and given most generously of their time.

Present Marketing Outlets

There are a number of methods by which Eskimo art products reach their markets. These are, in probably decreasing order of volume: (1) cooperatives which sell their purchases through the distributors (Canadian Arctic Producers in Ottawa and the Federation of Cooperatives of Nouveau Quebec in Levis); (2) Hudson's Bay Company stores which distribute their purchases either directly through their own retail outlets, or through other retailers with the Company acting as middle-man, e.g. the Canadian Handicrafts Guild; (3) directly to the individual collectors, e.g. white resdients of the North, ships' crews, and other visitors; (4) other Northern residents who act as middlemen, e.g. certain missionaries, teachers and other residents who make money on the side this way, and to some art dealers who visit the North for this purpose.

The Hudson's Bay Company:

The Hudson's Bay Company was, until recently, the major buyer of carvings in the Canadian Arctic. For the most part, the Company engaged in this trade for three purposes. Primarily, it was to make a profit on the carvings by adding a mark-up which would cover all expenses and allow them to make money. Secondly, and of great local importance, individual managers often bought large volumes of carvings in order to put money into the hands of their Eskimo customers which would then be spent almost immediately on other profitable items for sale in the Northern stores. Thirdly, members of the Company have told me that it has often bought carvings regardless of profit to maintain their own supply in order to foster the image of their Northern activities and to decorate or add prestige to their other more profitable sales lines, such as blankets etc., in their large Southern retail stores.

Since the early 1950's the Company has bought large volumes of carvings (e.g. $100,000+ annually) in some of the bigger settlements in the Eastern Arctic. This may have gone against the tastes of the individual managers (as they have told me), however it was to their financial advantage to increase volume. The

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Company has also used the sale of carvings to promote other profitable lines. For instance, in Port Harrison there was a time when they would only buy carvings from successful trappers in order to encourage the Eskimos to trap more and hence sell them more very profitable pelts. Similarly, the Company has occasionally stopped buying carvings with little or no warning when it believed its inventory was too large. Understandably, the Company could not feel totally responsible for maintaining continuity in the level of Eskimo income, and its continued existence as a trading company in no way depended on an item of such small volume, or in fact on their Northern stores at all. Some members of the Company have quite recently expressed the opinion that they might like to get out of the carving business altogether because (a) they were not making any significant profit on it, (b) they thought that the heyday of Eskimo carvings was over, and (c) they thought that the few individual artists who would make a good living from carving should better deal directly with the middlemen of the art market, i.e. the dealers. These statements were made to me before the recent upswing (1969-70) in demand for Eskimo carvings.

The general effect of the Company marketing system has been to buy carvings from all Eskimos with somewhat uncertain regard for "quality control," especially as the managers very readily admit that they are not in a very good position to judge the tastes of the unsophisticated art market. On the other hand, generally speaking, the price the Eskimos received for their carvings had been kept quite low by the managers until competition came along in the forms of co-operatives and other buyers who might possibly take this business away from the Company and, at the same time, channel the Eskimo's resultant income through competing retail stores. A similar result was felt to a lesser extent even before there were competing retail stores because many Eskimos had been buying larger and more expensive items through the mail-order catalogues. Whether in fact the marketing of carvings through the Company was subsidized by the rest of the Company's

business is a matter that outsiders will probably never know. Yet it is probably fair to say that the average mark-up on carvings sold through the Company via its own retail outlets or through some dealers is considerably less than the mark-up found in the marketing systems of the competing co-operatives (with some exceptions). Thus, although the prices generally paid in the North by Company managers have been fairly low, the retail prices of the carvings to the public have also been fairly low. For the bulk of carvings sold in this way, the low retail price has probably promoted greater sales and a greater number of retail outlets. This statement is true for average carvings for the average white North American buyer; it may not apply to the most expensive sculpture bought by the richer and more sophisticated collectors for whom the price is not quite so important.

Thus, we may say that a general effect of the Company's marketing methods in the last twenty years has been fairly beneficial to the average carver in providing him with a small but steady income, with exceptions, of course, where buying has ceased completely (e.g. in Sugluk in 1957, and in Povungnituk and Port Harrison in 1967). On the other hand, the Company system has tended less to produce "stars"--those admired and individually known artists whose promotion has been successfully carried out by other means. The Company has surprised itself in being able to sell such high volumes over such a long period of time; frequently during the last two decades Company people have wondered whether the "carving fad" was coming to an end, or whether the market was completely saturated, or whether the quality had dropped so low that further sales would be relatively poor. Yet the demand still exists and the Company's sales efforts are reaping great rewards in Canada and the United States. There are sub-trends in the buying practices in the North which modify to some extent the general effect noted above. It happens quite frequently that individual managers have got more and more into the habit of buying all carvings regardless of quality and

at gradually increasing the prices. This, of course, has poured more money into the community and back into the retail store, and is often in a response to competition from other buying agencies. This is seen by the Eskimos as a period of great prosperity, and the majority of the Eskimo population remembers such managers as "very good men."

The major feature of the Company as a marketing outlet, as compared with the co-operatives, is that regardless of the profit or mark-up, there is no further financial return to the carvers. The carvers receive the exact price of the item at the time they sell it with no hope of future rewards and, at the same time, of course, no responsibility towards the future marketing conditions.

In summary, it must be pointed out that the relationship between the bulk of the Eskimo populations and the Hudson's Bay Company is a very important one. The majority of the Eskimos look upon the Company as the rock of stability in an otherwise unreliable world. They see Government policies come and go, individual administrators with very different ideas come and go, work opportunities come and go, and generally speaking, in spite of the problems noted above, they feel that the Company is more dependable. This is expectable in view of the fact that many of the stores have been there for thirty, forty, or fifty years, whereas even the best co-operatives have only been there a decade or less. Thus, the Eskimos are probably more worried when the Hudson's Bay Company stops buying carvings in any particular place, than they would be if, for instance, a co-op ran out of money (as some of them do from time to time, e.g. at Frobisher Bay in 1968)or had to close down completely.

Sales Direct to Individual Whites:

Direct marketing to white buyers is of relatively little importance in most settlements. There are, however, increasing numbers of visitors, tourists, airline pilots, and continuing visits by ships accounting for perhaps a few thousand dollars a year in some settlements. The white buyers vary greatly in their

attitudes towards the Eskimos and art but, generally speaking, the prices the Eskimos get for their carvings this way are considerably higher than they could get at any agency which employs a middleman, Thus, the Eskimos try to use this market whenever possible (even against the exhortations of their mentors at the co-operatives, etc.) by visiting the houses of teachers and others, selling from door to door; by trying to sell onboard ships; and even, occasionally, selling by mail!

The producer to customer link is the dominant marketing route in settlements where there are large numbers of white residents, often with lots of money to spend, Eskimos from both Frobisher Bay and Hall Beach/Igloolik say that they sell the buil of their carvings to resident or visiting white personnel, and that the prices are far higher than they could get in the regular outlets. No other arrangements could probably benefit individual carvers as well in such settlements. Similar remarks are made by Eskimos who visit Southern Canada either for hospitalization or for other reasons, and who have the opportunity to carve and sell directly to nurses, doctors, hosts, friends, etc. This kind of selling is not a benefit evenly across the Eskimo population. It tends to benefit those Eskimos who are on more friendly terms with whites, those who are more aggressive in visiting whites for sales purposes, and those who are not willing to play the "Uncle Tomasi" role by letting the white buyer beat the price down. In terms of carving standards, the majority of sales are pbobably in the cheap to middle price range, since most Northern residents and tourists do not have the large funds necessary to purchase the most outstanding carvings.

Northern Middlemen:

Another minor outlet for Eskimo carvings resembles the direct selling to Northern residents. Some individuals and institutions have set themselves up as limited distribution middlemen who buy carvings in the North (probably for higher prices than those obtainable at the co-ops or Company stores), and sell them

either to friends down South who might be dealers or to other institutional networks. Examples include missionaries who take carvings in the collection, for donations, or for reasonable prices; schoolteachers and government administrative workers who buy carvings for good prices and sell them to friends or dealers down South; and the occasional dealer who sets up a temporary buying post in the North. The latter case is rare and not encouraged, but it has occurred in significant cases, e.g. Arden Barnes who bought carvings direct from the Povungnituk Eskimos during some periods in the summers of the 1960's. The financial advantages of these arrangements resemble those of selling directly to white residents in the North, though the arrangements are rarely of permanence. In addition, of course, there are the moral and spiritual benefits of selling through your local missionary.

The Co-operatives:

Production and, more recently, consumption co-operatives are a fast-growing form of commercial institution in the Canadian Arctic. The first co-operative concerned with the marketing of art products was the Povungnituk Sculptors Guild which was started a little more than a decade ago. While this was the inspiration for the formation of similar co-operatives in other settlements, other inspirations have come from the Government's program of producers' co-operatives, the first of which started at George River in 1959. In some ways, the majority of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development affiliated co-operatives are direct outgrowths of the previous Department of Northern Affairs policy whereby local administrators bought carvings, sometimes in competition with the Hudson's Bay Company, in order to stimulate the local economy and reduce the welfare rolls. Such activities started in the late 1950's. DNA by this means got itself into the business of selling Eskimo art, which involved many ethical and financial problems. The problems were transferred out of the direct administrative network by the more recent creation of Canadian Arctic Producers in 1964 as the buying and

distributing agency for the art of most co-operatives in the Northwest Territories.

Although the original object of co-operatives in general was to cut out the "rapacious capitalist middleman," to increase the benefits to producers, and to decrease the eventual prices to consumers, the emphasis has been slightly different in the Canadian Arctic. Aspects of these financial goals are found most clearly in the direct competition with the Hudson's Bay Company which many felt provided too little return to the Eskimo population. Whether the co-operatives have been profitable or not, the financial advantages to the Eskimo population in general have been widespread and immediate. Competition has generally led to higher prices for the producer-artist and at the same time has led to a general lowering of prices in the retail stores. But co-operatives have also filled major social functions in providing a community organization of some power, permanence, and purpose. Government efforts to promote viable community councils, etc. met with very little success until co-operatives came along. Co-operatives have allowed Eskimos to feel that they have institutions with which they can identify, comparable to those controlled by the whiteman. Much of the propaganda constantly poured out by co-operative mentors has rubbed off and, in many instances, Eskimos "shop co-op" because they feel it is "their" institution. Co-operatives have provided added avenues of employment for Eskimos and perhaps more importantly, have given many opportunities for managerial training and increased occupational status for certain employees. To many people, the measure of success of a co-operative is to be found in its social developments rather than in its financial profitability.

Generally speaking, co-operative marketing systems are based upon the idea that the producer gets a certain initial price for the product and that when the item is finally marketed, a proportion of the profit is given back to the individual producer. Thus, the producer has an immediate and a future financial return. This works very well assuming that the co-operative marketing system makes a profit. In the case of those co-operative systems in the Canadian North, it is doubtful whether they do because both of the major ones received considerable subsidy

somewhere along the line. Part of this subsidy is in terms of direct grants, capitalization, or favorable loans; part of it is in terms of advertising and promotion, not charged to the co-operative network; and part of it is in the free assistance given by many in a manner that would rarely be available to ordinary commercial institutions.

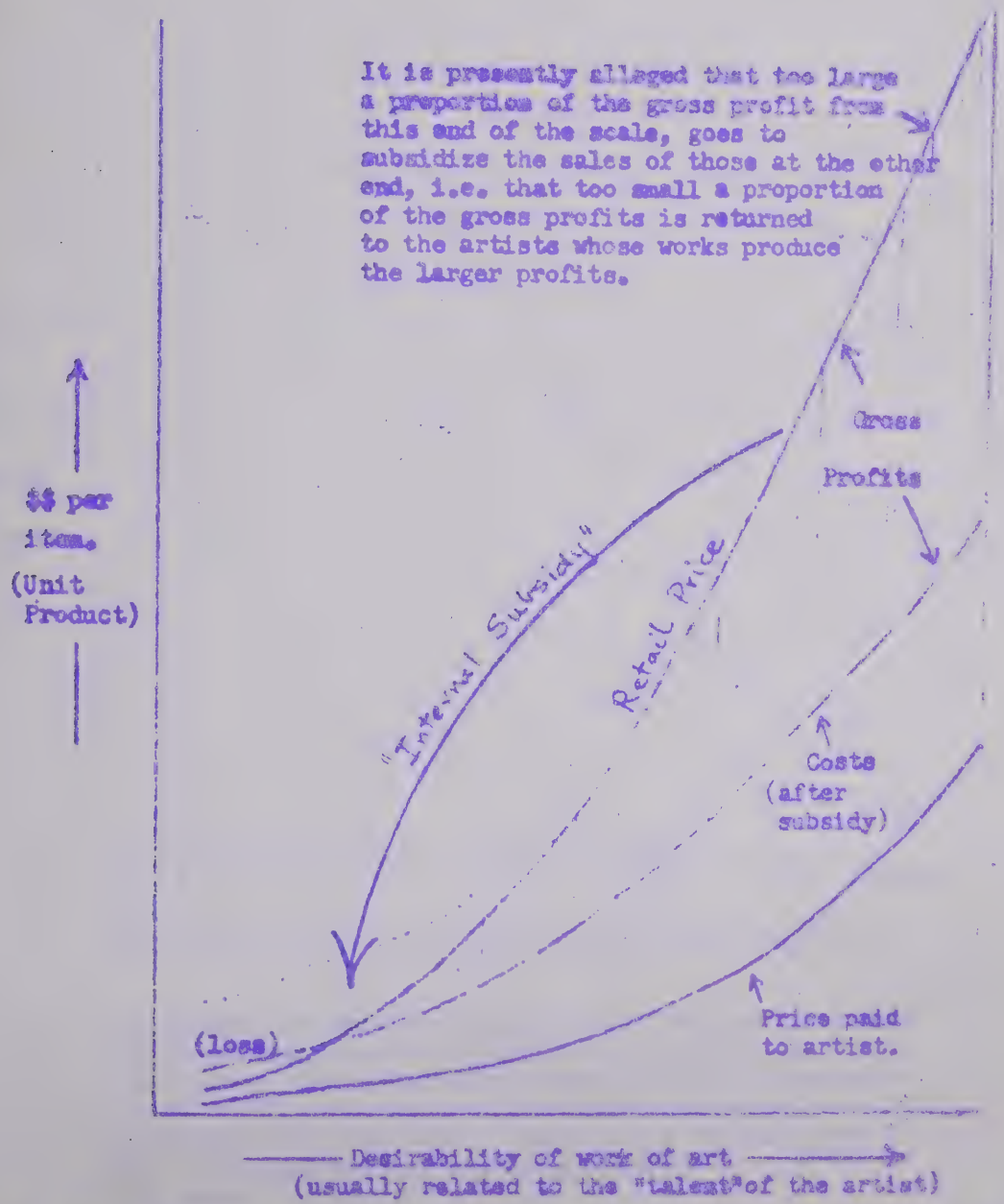
The secondary return due to the share holders or members of a co-operative institution is usually in the form of a patronage dividend or refund. Thus, the proportion of the final profit of the institution which goes to any individual member is in direct proportion to the amount of business that individual does with the institution. In the case of the Canadian Arctic, the patronage refund, called qairniku or amiarniku, should be in direct proportion to the dollar volume of sculptures or prints sold to and through the co-operative. This simple financial arrangement is not in fact found in the Canadian Arctic and is rarely found in co-operatives down South either. The co-operatives in the North are newish and/or expanding institutions. Like other co-operatives they need to raise capital for further improvements or increases in volume. They find it most convenient to raise part of their capital by retaining a portion of the patronage refund rather than by merely borrowing at commercial financial institutions. Thus, in many of the smaller and more shakey co-operatives, all the patronage refund goes into the capital of the co-operative institution. In povungnituk, on the one hand, the co-operative member customers have occasionally received fifty to one hundred percent of their patronage refund. But in Cape Dorset, the largest producer co-operative in terms of dollar volume, no patronage refund has been paid to the members although it was promised some years ago (with the exception of Parr and maybe one or two others, over sixty-five years of age, who have claimed the lump sum in cash). In all the significant cases then, the second financial return that the Eskimo members have expected has been turned into shares which are owned by these members but which are not directly visible and which do not pay dividends. In the case of Cape Dorset, some of the more successful artists

individually own thousands of dollars of shares, and as long as they are getting good prices for their art products, they have worried little about actualizing this second financial return.

There are two features of this picture which some observers have from time to time deemed inequitable. The first is that the works of some artists can be sold on the open market with a far greater mark-up than the majority of the works of the less renowned artists. Thus, the profits on the works of these few well-known artists are supporting the running of the co-operative in greater proportion than the dollar volume that these works represent. (See Diagram of Prices and Profits, following page). From this factor it has been said that these more renowned and successful artists are receiving a relatively lower initial price for their works than they would if they were getting directly a fixed proportion of the retail market price. Thus, they are subsidizing the sales of many of the poorer and less desired art products by supporting a marketing institution which could not otherwise handle them.

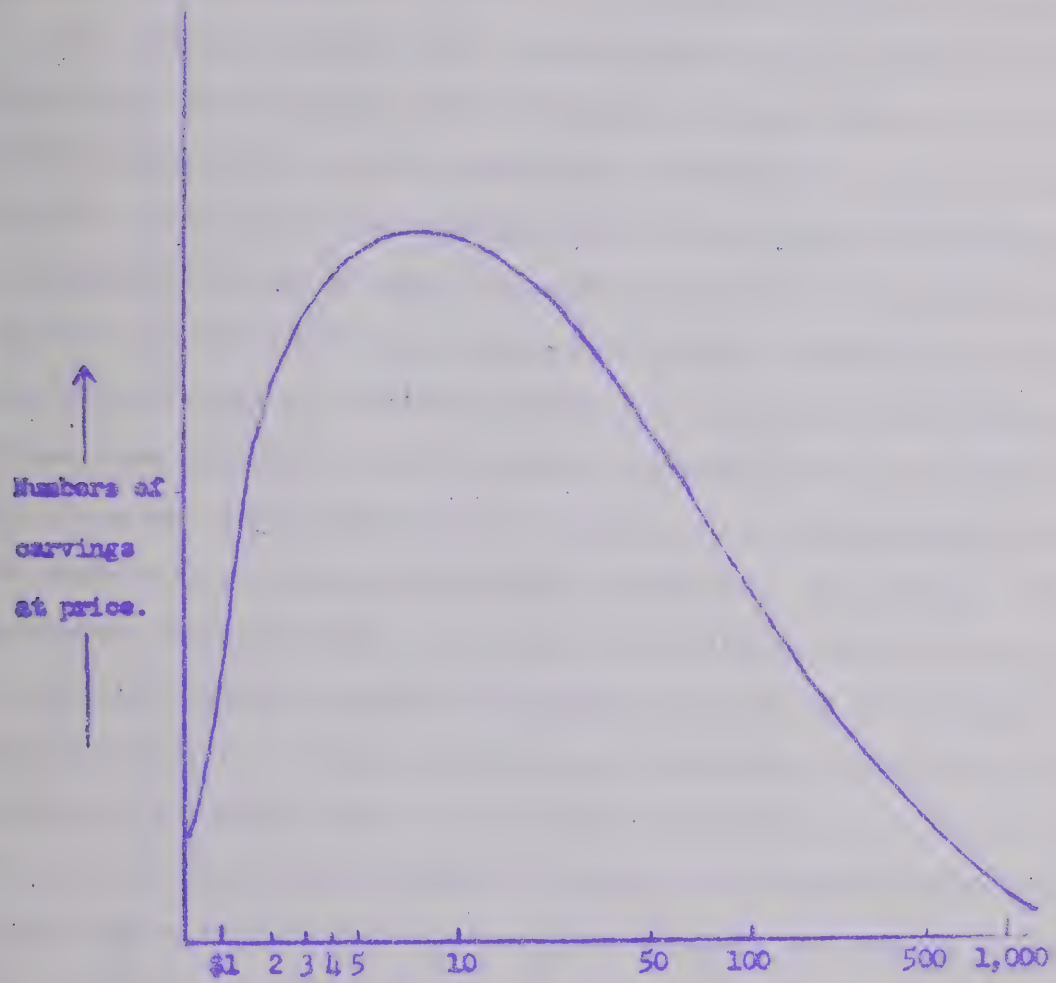
Secondly, the final return on these sales, in terms of the patronage refund, is being poured into share capital which is used by the co-op both for physical expansion and for paying off debts and maintaining inventories. These people, in fact, own large proportions of the co-operative itself and yet benefit less from it because they could probably make as good or better livings if the co-operative were not present; whereas the majority of their less talented neighbors could not make nearly such a good living if the co-op had to raise its capital through other means. In general we may say that the extra profit from the mark-up on the best works produced by a few individuals supports the co-operative organization, allowing for a smaller mark-up on the less desired pieces, giving these latter a salability that they might not otherwise have.

Price and Profit Diagram for Contemporary Co-operative Marketing. (not to scale)


It is presently alleged that too large a proportion of the gross profit from this end of the scale, goes to subsidize the sales of those at the other end, i.e. that too small a proportion of the gross profits is returned to the artists whose works produce the larger profits.
$$ per item. (Unit Product)
Gross Profits
Retail Price
"Internal Subsidy"
Costs (after subsidy)
Price paid to artist.
(loss)
Desirability of work of art
(usually related to the "talent" of the artist)

N.B. The volume of carvings presents a different picture because the majority of the works fall at the lower (less desired) end of the scale. Also please note that if hidden and direct subsidy were removed, the broken line would rise vertically, i.e. far more works would be said "at a Loss". (Letter Lee)

Diagram of Numbers of Carvings at Price to Artist. (not to scale)*



Price paid to artist per unit carving at point of sale.

These data were gathered mainly during the year of 1967-68 at the cooperatives at Povungnituk, Port Harrison, Great Whale River, Sugluk and Cape Dorset. Systematic recording of prices was employed for a few thousand pieces, but the information was confirmed by more random observations at other times and places, including distributors and stores down South.

Retainer Systems and Artist-Dealer Relations:

Retainer systems and other marketing innovations have been mentioned by a number of people in recent years as mechanisms partly overcoming the present supposed inequality inherent in the present co-operative systems. The idea of a retainer fee, not uncommon with artists down South, could work in two ways.

The simplest retainer system, and the least mentioned, would be for the co-operative itself to pay a montly retainer to the most successful artists. They would be assured of a constant income and a constant outlet for all their works. The artist would, of course, receive a second payment based on the eventual sale and profits of his or her works. The major advantages of this system include: the certainty of income for artists during their less productive periods; and the prevention of sales of art products directly to competing outlets such as the Hudson's Bay Company, tourists, or others. An artist would be required to sell all his or her output through the co-operative which would guarantee a market for all these works as well as providing the retainer fee. The long term effect of such arrangements, in addition to those mentioned above, would be to help the co-operative. The co-operative institution could pick and choose amongst the artists selling to it those whose works are most desired, and likely to remain profitable in the long run. The co-operative would therefore be assured that the products of such people would not be sold through competing networks or drained off by visitors and residents of the North who are prepared to pay higher than normal prices. A disadvantage of this system could occur if the Eskimo producer got distracted and failed to produce enough art work to justify the payment of the monthly retainer. Without indicting particular individuals, it has been noted that certain artists are quite likely to be very happy with the retainer fee coming in regularly and become distracted by other time-consuming occupations such as hunting, card-playing, etc. This leads to pressure on these artists to produce and carvings far below the usual quality are quickly turned out to meet these pressures. There are other Eskimo artists of course, who are more

"responsible" who would never think of such behavior.

Certain Eskimo artists are so well known, and their works comand such a high price, that it has been suggested that they make arrangements with particular art dealers to sell their works directly through these dealers. By cutting out some of the middleman arrangements and, more importantly, by getting a far higher proportion of the total profit or markup on their works, they would receive a far greater income than they do now. It has been said "that they should be adequately rewarded for their great talents and remarkable output." Such arrangements would presumably also be on the retainer system to insure for the dealer that the profitable works of these people are sold through this exclusive outlet.[1] For the reliable artists this would be undoubtedly of great financial benefit and would allow them even greater riches than they now enjoy. The proportions of the mark-up on their work which are now channeled into shares in co-operatives would be channeled directly to them. They would be even more outstandingly rich amongst their neighbors than they are already. For the less reliable artist, this arrangement might also be profitable but could come to disastrous ends if their output failed to keep up with that expected by the dealer. I could even imagine legal tangles, extensive litigation, and increased alcoholic onsumption as the outcome of these possibilities.

A combination of these methods might be such that the co-operative pays the retainer but channels the individual's output to the dealer who in fact finances the retainer. There might be an advantage here, in that local control and pressure from known and familiar individuals might be more successful in encouraging certain artists to keep up the continuity and quality of their art production. The major disadvantage of this method would be that it might deprive the co-operative of the advantages of being middleman for the most profitable

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[1] There are a few artists whose works are handled exclusively by certain art dealers at the present time. However the artist is not paid a regular retainer. The cooperative puts aside their works for these dealers but handles the pricing the usual way. Other works are often put aside, too, for special exhibitions of the works of the artist, or of a community, or even of a certain subject matter.

works of the most talented artists. The co-operatives therefore, would have to increase the mark-up on the works of the less talented (either by increasing subsidy, or by lowering the price paid directly to the artist, or by reducing the real or potential amount of the patronage refund). The co-operative as a financial institution would cease to reap the benefits of rapidly growing capitalization through the efforts of its own members and would be forced to look for funds elsewhere. I would venture to predict that if five or ten best artists in each settlement took advantage of these new arrangements, none of the art producers' co-operatives could continue to survive or grow without increased subsidy. If the subsidy were not forthcoming, or if the demand for Eskimo carvings fell, this might threaten the very existence of such producers' co-operatives. It might, of course, only threaten the co-operative's ability to regularly buy the poorer quality carvings on which there is a smaller mark-up, if any. Thus, in fact, the most talented artists would cease to subsidize their less talented brethren.

Conclusion:

My conclusion is to recommend against retainer systems in general, and particularly against retainer systems which might threaten the success of co-operatives. If retainers were to be involved at all, I would recommend the first type whereby the co-operative itself pays the retainer. If those artists chosen for such arrangements were known by local personnel to be reliable, the benefit would in the long run accrue to the co-operative. Whether the financial benefit would accrue to the artist, I do not know, but I guess that a monthly retainer fee would be subject to a far greater rate of income tax, and might even change thenow subsidized arrangements of such people compared with the present situation where the taxes are low and the artists are deemed to be "unemployed" in deciding the monthly

rates to be paid for rent, electricity, garbage disposal, water, etc.[1]

Retainer or other arrangements direct with dealers, might for certain artists increase their income greatly. I do not believe that such increases are justified financially or ethically. These are the very artists whose income is greatest anyhow, and who are the "richest" people in their community. They do not complain that their income is too low, nor that the differential between their income and that of their less fortunate brethren is too small. If their income is to be increased, it would be better increased by paying a proportion of the second financial return, the patronage refund, directly to them instead of continuing to pile up the shares that they own in the co-operative. Ethically, these people have benefited greatly from the efforts of the co-operatives and from the free help of those associated with them in marketing their carvings to increase their income, fame, and to boost their prices. In addition, the co-operative distribution networks are subsidized one way or another, contributing to their prosperity. Furthermore, they have had great tax advantages which they have perhaps not realized. In addition, much of their expenses including housing, water, garbage, electricity, heating and other general services have been extensively subsidized. I could see the possibility that if these artists' incomes rose to great heights, legal, political, and other complaints down South could lead to the end of these very comfortable subsidies.

The greatest threat, to my mind, is to the co-operatives themselves, subsidized as they are. The co-operative institutions are perhaps the major hope for the future of the Eskimos and for the social health of their communities.

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[1] For instance, in the Northwest Territories at present most Eskimos have prefabricated 3-bedroom Government housing (approx. $8,000 cost erected). They pay the Government a sum every month to cover "rent," electricity, fuel oil, repairs etc. All are subsidized, but the "unemployed," including carvers pay, $27 per month (and welfare cases as low as $2), whereas those regularly employed pay $45 to $67, depending on the household income.

They provide jobs, training, purpose, unity, and above all, pride. They provide more real education into the political and commercial nature of the present world for many of their workers and members than all the schools put together. The Eskimos' previous faith in the Hudson's Bay Company has gradually been transferred to what they can claim as their own institutions. Any major blow to these institutions would be disastrous for a large proportion of the Eskimo population in the North. It would also be disastrous for the incomes of some of the less talented artists, and it would, of course, eventually be disastrous for those government agencies which have to provide welfare and other services for this now dependent population.

All of the above, and the future of art production itself, would of course be nullified by major industrial/extractive developments in the North, if such developments either employed a large proportion of the Eskimo adult population, or if legal arrangements were such that the Eskimo population in general derived royalties from the extraction of wealth in their lands.

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